NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5883 JUNE 2, 1978
RON PEMSTEIN/VIENNA

AUSTRIAS "DEAD" BORDER

ANNCR:

AUSTRIA AND HUNGARY RECENTLY AGREED TO ABOLISH VISAS FOR THEIR CITIZENS TRAVELING BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES. THE MORE THAN TWO HUNDRED KILOMETER-LONG BORDER IS ONE OF THE FREEST EAST-WEST CROSSING POINTS. BUT AS RON PEMSTEIN FOUND ON A VISIT TO AUSTRIA'S BORDER WITH CZECHOSLOVAKIA, THE SITUATION ALONG THAT FRONTIER IS DIFFERENT.

LOWER AUSTRIA SHARES A FOUR-HUNDRED-KILOMETER LONG FRONTIER WITH ITS COMMUNIST NEIGHBOR. THIS IS AN AREA THAT AUSTRIANS CALL THE "TODESGRENZE" OR "DEAD BORDER." AND THE SITUATION HAS HAD NEGATIVE EFFECTS ON THE LOCAL AUSTRIAN ECONOMY.

THERE WERE TWENTY-SEVEN BORDER CROSSING POINTS BETWEEN LOWER AUSTRIA AND CZECHOSLOVAKIA BEFORE THE SECOND WORLD WAR. NOW THERE ARE ONLY THREE. AND THE LACK OF CONTACT HHAS REDUCED INCENTIVES FOR AUSTRIANS TO STAY IN THE AREA.

NOW THERE'S AN AUSTRIAN EFFORT TO ENCOURAGE INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM NEAR THE BORDER IN ORDER TO REVIVE THE TERRITORY. THERE ARE ALSO PUBLIC WORK PROJECTS. "WE HAVE THE BEST ROADS LEADING TO THE CZECHOSLOVAK BORDER," ONE LOWER AUSTRIAN OFFICIAL, SAID, "EVEN THOUGH THIS IS NOTHEHBOMOST-TRAVELED AREA. BUT WE BUILD THE ROADS HERE TO CREATE EMPLOYMENT."

THERE'S ALSO LONG-RANGE PROGRAM TO CREATE FIFTY THOUSAND JOBS FOR YOUNG AUSTRIANS IN THE AREA BY 1981. THE AUSTRIAN GOVERNMENT IS OFFERING VARIOUS INCENTIVES TO ENCOURAGE INDUSTRIES TO LEAVE VIENNA AND COME TO THE BORDER AREA.

ANOTHER MEANS OF BRINGING PEOPLE TO THE AREA IS TOURISM. THE PALACES AND FORTRESSES THAT DOT THE FRONTIER HAD BEEN ALLOWED TO DETERIORATE. AUSTRIA IS NOW RE-BUILDING THESE STRUCTURES AND TURNING THEM INTO MUSEUMS. THE OUTSTANDING HUNTING EXHIBIT AT THE LOCAL MARCHEGG PALACE MUSEUM IS HEAVILY ADVERTISED THROUGHOUT AUSTRIA. TWO OTHER PALACES NEARBY HAVE ALSO BEEN CONVERTED TO MUSEUMS, (OPT) ONE FEATURES JAPAN, WHILE THE OTHER COMMEMORATES THE BATTLE SEVEN HUNDRED YEARS AGO (1278) IN WHICH THE HABSBURGS DEFEATED THE BOHEMIAN KING, OTTOKAR THE SECOND, AND BEGAN THEIR LONG REIGN OVER THE AREA. (END OPT)

LOWER AUSTRIAN OFFICIALS SAY THEY TRY TO COOPERATE WITH CZECHOSLOVAKIA BUT THAT IT'S NOT EASY. AUSTRIANS ARE REQUIRED TO HAVE VISAS TO CROSS THE BORDER, AND HEAVILY-ARMED CZECHOSLOVAK GUARDS TRY TO MAKE SURE THEIR COUNTRYMEN DO NOT LEAVE WITHOUT PERMISSION. THERE WERE ALSO SHOOTINGS OF AUSTRIANS WHO ACCIDENTLY STRAYED ACROSS THE BORDER LAST YEAR.

"IT USED TO BE WHENEVER A PRIVATE PLANE STRAYED ACROSS THE BORDER, THE CZECHOSLOVAKS WOULD SHOOT IT DOWN," ONE AUSTRIAN SAID. "BUT IF THE SAME THING HAPPENED IN HUNGARY, THE PILOT WOULD BE GIVEN SOME GOULASH AND TRAVEL BROCHURES AND SENT BACK HOME".

HIGH-LEVEL AUSTRO-CZECHOSLOVAKIAN TALKS HAVE SMOOTHED RELATIONS RECENTLY. MORE BORDER CROSSINGS ARE SUPPOSED TO BE OPENED. AN AUSTRIAN HELICOPTER LANDED IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA AT THE END OF MAY AFTER LOSING ITS WAY IN BAD WEATHER. THE CREW AND THEIR HELICOPTER WERE RETURNED AFTER A FEW DAYS. THE PILOT SAID WITH SOME SURPRISE: "THEY WERE EVEN FRIENDLY SOMETIMES."

OFFICIALS IN LOWER AUSTRIA HOPE CONTACTS WITH CZECHOSLOVAKIA WILL IMPROVE. THEY SEE A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TENSION AND THEIR DIFFICULTY IN ATTRACTING AUSTRIANS TO THE BORDER AREA. AND

THEY HOPE AUSTRIA'S IMPROVED RELATIONS WITH PRAGUE--SYMBOLIZED BY PRESIDENT RUDOLF KIRCHSCHLAEGERS STATE VISIT LATER THIS YEAR--CAN REVITALIZE THE "DEAD BORDER."

-0-

WJL/RTD